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Eminem Ruled 2010 – And Here's How

Rapper rose from ashes of disappointing album to top of the charts and 10 Grammy nominations.
By Gil Kaufman
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It's fitting that Eminem is planning to return to the big screen next year in the [article id="1654192"]"8 Mile"-inspired boxing film "Southpaw."[/article] Because like Rocky after he was counted down and out so many times in that famous pugilist movie serial, Marshall Mathers seemed like he'd run out of gas in 2009 only to come storming all the way back, and then some, in 2010 to post one of his biggest and baddest years to date.

At a time when younger artists like Justin Bieber, Kanye West and Lady Gaga are relying on social media, a dizzying blitz of promotional appearances and concerts, and a nonstop hype machine to keep their careers stoked, Eminem's path back to the top of the musical heap was decidedly old-school: He released a great album in *Recovery* that emotionally connected with fans thanks to some of the most hook-heavy songs of his career while maintaining an elusive persona that kept them guessing.

"On *Recovery,* he was really able to tap into the emotive 2002 stuff that people loved in '8 Mile,' " said *Complex* Editor in Chief Noah Callahan-Bever. "And I think that the fact that he's not tech-savvy or any of that stuff really doesn't hurt him because he's able to cultivate a little bit of a mystery about himself and his comings and goings. That exclusivity creates more value to his limited presence."

While songs like mega first single "Not Afraid" and the inescapable Rihanna hookup "Love the Way You Lie" were getting wall-to-wall spins at radio, Em made only a few promotional appearances, played just a handful of dates -- including the lauded [article id="1647120"]Home and Home shows[/article] with Jay-Z -- and managed to keep that air of inscrutability about himself while putting up the best sales figures for any album released in 2010. The less you saw of him, the more you wanted to see him.

"I think it kind of benefited because [of] the whole backstory behind the album," Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, former executive editor of *The Fader,* said about the drama surrounding Slim Shady's second comeback attempt after five years in drug-induced exile and 2009's so-so reception for *Relapse.* "And his comeback from a bad album ... the whole thing with the pills, and I think it kind of lent to his mystery. There's something to be said for rappers who have a trillion Twitter followers but at the same time you kind of don't want to be able to say whatever you want to your favorite rapper. I think that he kind of kept his integrity in the way that he needed to as an older rapper."

Putting out a barrage of cameo verses has been the go-to move for up-and-comers like Drake and Nicki Minaj as a way to establish their brand. But Marshall borrowed that same new-school page and made it feel classic by being very selective about which songs he lent his voice to. And, almost without exception, every choice he made was an instant classic, from his killer verse on Drake's "Forever" to a solid duet with Lil Wayne on "Drop the World," some tasty bars on B.o.B's "Airplanes" and a nod to the new kids on the block on Nicki's "Roman's Revenge."

Most of his peers seem to believe that more is more -- more endorsements, more products, more interviews, more guests on their tracks -- even as Em came off as the wily veteran who picks his high-percentage shots while the rest of the squad is firing off endless jumpers.

"When Eminem went away, the feeling of like, 'Well, that whole market's going away. All those people, they're just dispersing off into the ether and no one's gonna be ready for him when he's ready to come back,' " said *New York Times* music critic Jon Caramanica of the excitement that greeted the rapper's return to form. "And what I think you realize this year is that all those people are like sleeper cells and all got activated. All of a sudden, 'Oh, Eminem's back. It's OK to buy his CD again. I didn't have anyone I feel like I wanted to buy for the last two or three years; now I feel like I can commit to Eminem.' "

What also became clear this year, Caramanica said, is that unlike flash-in-the-pan pop rappers or mainstream acts whose audiences don't grow with them as they mature, Eminem's fans have been loyal, even as he's picked up a whole new generation of followers thanks to his more accessible new songs. The evidence of that trend can be seen in the fact that, months after its release, *Recovery* was still routinely hanging around the top 20, if not top 10, on the *Billboard* albums chart, an indication that new fans were being brought onboard every week.

That slow and steady, measured approach clearly paid off, as Em won two VMAs (off of eight nominations) in September and ended the year by loading up with a leading 10 Grammy nominations and a #2 spot on [article id="1654391"]MTV News' Man of the Year[/article] countdown. You can be sure when the Grammys are handed out in February, Marshall's name will be mentioned a few times, because if there's anything the Recording Academy (and, let's face it, all of America) loves, it's a comeback.

What did you think of Em's 2010? Let us know in the comments!